

**HOLY TRINITY ANGLICAN CHURCH, HAMPTON
SERMON TRINITY SUNDAY (30/05/2010)**

THEME: WHAT DO CHRISTIANS BELIEVE IN?

“Religions are really all the same and they all lead in the end to the same God.” This phrase or something like it is a statement I’ve heard made a number of times by people and they are nearly always people who are not at all religious and are somewhat bemused and confused and even repulsed by the vigorous debate and sometimes bigoted and aggressive claiming of the absolute truth by ardent adherents of different particular faiths.

What they are really trying to say I think is that “religions should really be all the same and should really all lead to the same God.” Then if that were true there would not be all this religious fundamentalism and aggression between people of different faiths and it really would not matter what you believe as they are all the same and so I am therefore comfortable not believing in anything.

But the reality is that religions are patently not all the same – far from it. Do they all lead to the same God – ultimately and ideally perhaps they do, for God is infinite and can I guess contain all journeys to know God – but again in reality different religions don’t all lead to the same understanding about who or what God is in relationship to each personal believer and this is where major debate and disagreement occurs. God can probably contain and embrace most of all that difference of understanding, but we limited human beings can’t and there’s the problem!

Today of course is Trinity Sunday – the day when we celebrate as a Christian community the rather difficult and challenging Christian doctrine about our understanding of how God interacts with the world as one God in a Trinity of being. Today is also for us here at Holy Trinity Hampton our Patronal Festival – our church name day.

What sort of faith is Christianity? What sort of God do we as Christians believe in?

There are probably five major words that describe what sort of faith and God Christians believe in. Our faith in God is Personal. It is Trinitarian. It is Incarnational. It is Soteriological. And it is Apocalyptic.

There, that’s easy to understand isn’t it? Only joking of course!!

Our faith in God is basically made up of five attributes - Personal, Trinitarian, Incarnational, Soteriological and Apocalyptic. And these five attributes make Christians different in our approach to God when compared to all other faiths. With Judaism we have perhaps two of the five more or less in common. With Islam, we have perhaps one of the five attributes in common. With Hinduism and Buddhism it would be difficult to argue completely comfortably any of the five in common.

So all religions are clearly not the same.

When we say the Nicene Creed, the carefully developed statement of Christian faith that all Christians in theory should give assent to, we actually state these five definitive and core elements of Christian belief in God.

First we believe in a God who is Personal: that is a God who desires to be in intimate relationship with us. Our God is not a God who creates us and then wants to leave us totally alone to battle out our lives as best we can with no guidance or support or empowering for the journey. Our God is not a distant, non-relational God. Our God is also not a punitive, angry judge sort of God who does not want to get involved relationally with us but just punish us when we get it wrong. Our God is a God of love and desires but doesn't force our love back, in a mutual personal relationship.

So God is Personal. In Judaism there too is a belief in a personal relational God, but in Islam God is definitely not a personal God. The word Islam actually means submission. God, Allah, demands a believer's complete submission to his will. He or she doesn't need to understand why – but just needs to do it for their own good.

So, from the Christian understanding, God is Personal.

Secondly, the Christian understanding of God is Trinitarian. We believe in one God only, but we also believe in a God who has a complex unity of being within God's own personhood. God is one but operates in the human world at least in three distinct ways of being – as God the Father, as God the Son and as God the Holy Spirit. This is the Trinity of God – not three Gods but one God who personally involves himself in our lives in three distinct modes of being. As the Father, the Creator and sustainer of the world. As the Son the intimate friend and redeemer of humankind. As the Holy Spirit, that energy and being of the infinite God that suffuses our very being giving us wisdom, creativity, and the ability to love, to communicate and reflect and to be in relationship with others, and the ability to care for and develop and steward our creation. So secondly the Christian understanding of God is Trinitarian.

Thirdly we believe in an Incarnational God. Incarnatus is a Latin word which means “to take flesh.” We believe in a God who took our flesh and became one with us as a human being in Jesus of Nazareth. This is perhaps the most contentious belief in the Christian faith – that God can and would somehow become a human being. It isn't natural – it isn't normal – in human terms it isn't possible – yet God the creator can do it and our glory and wonder is that God so loved the world that he became at one with the world in human form in Jesus Christ. And thus our faith is a faith to be “enfleshed” or lived out in the world too!

So the Christian faith is an incarnational faith.

Fourthly the Christian faith is a Soteriological faith. “Soter” is the Greek word for saviour. A soteriological faith is a faith that believes not only in God being incarnated, born as a human in Jesus, but also that the purpose of being born was that Jesus would be our saviour. That Jesus would live our life and thereby show us how to live our life better and in a closer, personal relationship with God. That Jesus would suffer and die for us and then rise again from death so that ultimately we can be saved from the power of eternal death and the power of cancerous sin. Jesus defeats the power of human death and Jesus provides the “chemotherapy” if you like for the cancer of sin. Sin is always with us but in Jesus we can overwhelm the destructive power of our sin and put that power nearly totally or somewhat in remission.

So the Christian faith is soteriological – a faith in a Saviour.

Finally the Christian faith is apocalyptic – apocalyptic is from a Greek work that means “the revealing” – and is used to denote a revealing of hidden, future things. Christians believe that God has revealed in Jesus that our ultimate future is not in eternal death but instead in life eternal in the Kingdom of Heaven. Christians believe that God has revealed that Jesus Christ will come again at the end of earthly time to restore and recreate all things into a new and perfect creation. Christians believe in some sort of future judgment and renewal where we will have to face and accept accountability for all our willfulness and wrongdoing and selfishness and abusive behaviour both physical and mental and spiritual against others.

Christians believe there is a future and a somewhat hidden but partially revealed or apocalyptic reality to our faith.

So on this Trinity Sunday we struggle with the five deep realities that we seek to believe as Christians. None of us will ever probably completely understand any let alone all of them, none of us will probably ever be entirely comfortable with all of them in their entirety, all of us will have confusion and doubts at times about elements of them. But that’s okay – that is part of the faith journey and part of the trust we in the end must give to a God who is ultimately so infinite and beyond our comprehension yet a God we seek to have some understanding of and a personal relationship with. A God who has revealed himself to us wonderfully and in a special way in Jesus Christ.

So again our faith is basically made up of five important attributes – it is Personal, Trinitarian, Incarnational, Soteriological and Apocalyptic.

Now you can go and sit for your “Basics of Christianity” theology exam!!